JOHN J. SERRY, SR., COLLECTION

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UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

Finding aid prepared by Gail E. Lowther, Spring 2023
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DESCRIPTION OF COLLECTION

Shelf location: C3B 15,6–7
Extent: 3 linear feet

Biographical Sketch

John J. Serry, Sr. (born John Louis Serrapica; 1915–2003) was a concert accordionist, organist, composer, arranger, and educator.

Serry was born on January 29, 1915, in Brooklyn, NY, to two Italian immigrants, Pasquale Serrapica and Anna Balestrieri. As a young child, he demonstrated a natural talent on the piano and, with his father’s encouragement, learned to accompany photographic recordings of classical music. In 1926, at the age of 10, Serry began studying the accordion under Joseph Rossi at the Pietro Deiro School in New York. In the following years, his musical education expanded to include lessons in piano and harmony with Albert Rizzi and two years of studies with Gene Von Hallberg focusing on harmony and counterpoint; further, in the 1940s, Serry completed private studies in piano with Jascha Zade, organ with Arthur Guttow, and advanced harmony and orchestration with the composer Robert Strassburg.

Serry gained success as a performer beginning in his teens, initially appearing as a soloist on various radio stations in New York and, at the age of 17, at the Radio City Music Hall. In the 1930s, Serry played with a number of New York big bands and orchestras, including the Ralph Gomez Tango Orchestra, the Hugo Mariani Tango Orchestra, and the Lester Lanin Orchestra. In 1937, he joined the jazz ensemble Shep Fields and His Rippling Rhythm for their nationwide tour;
he also made several recordings with the ensemble on RCA Victor’s Bluebird label. In the 1940s, Serry performed with the CBS Pan America Orchestra (1940–1949) under the direction of Alfredo Antonini and the Columbia Concert Orchestra (1940–1949), and in 1949, he joined the original CBS Orchestra as a staff accordionist (1949–1960). Additionally, Serry collaborated with numerous conductors, ensembles, and other noted accordionists on concert performances (including accordion recitals and a 1948 concert gala at Carnegie Hall) and recordings on RCA Victor (Charles Magnate Accordion Band, Mischa Borr Orchestra, RCA Victor Accordion Orchestra, and Bel-Cordions), Alpha Records (Viva America Orchestra), Columbia Records (CBS Tipica Orchestra), Sonora Records (Biviano Accordion and Rhythm Sextette), and Dot Records (with Al Caiola and Bernie Leighton). Later in life, he augmented his accordion career by performing as a freelance organist at the Interfaith Chapel on the Long Island University C. W. Post Campus in Brookville, NY.

Beyond his performance career, Serry also enjoyed success as an educator and composer/arranger. From 1939 to 1942, he served as Assistant Dean of Accordion and Harmony at the Biviano Accordion Center in Manhattan. In 1945, Serry founded a music studio, where he taught accordion, piano, and organ; his Serry School of Accordion operated into the late 1980s. Serry also published several method books and pedagogical material for the accordion and was invited to contribute to the annual series of Master Accordion Classes and seminars sponsored by the American Accordionists Association in New York City. His compositions include substantive concert works for accordion (e.g., American Rhapsody, 1955; Concerto for Free Bass Accordion, 1966); transcriptions and arrangements of popular songs; original keyboard, choral, and vocal works; and arrangements of his original works for solo flute (written for and dedicated to Julius Baker).

John Serry, Sr., died on September 14, 2003, at the age of 88 after a brief illness. He was survived by his wife, Julia Trafficante Serry, and children Anna Rounbehler, John Serry, Jr. (ESM BM 1975, MM 1991), and Peter Serry (UR BA 1980), having been preceded in death by one son, Robert (1944–1993).

Provenance

The materials in this Collection were the gift of Peter J. Serry and were received by the Sibley Music Library in two deposits, in March and in June, 2016.

Scope and Content

The John J. Serry, Sr., Collection comprises more than 50 original compositions and arrangements, primarily in manuscript; one scrapbook containing press clippings, letters, and photographs documenting Mr. Serry’s career; and ten recordings. Mr. Serry’s compositions include works for free bass accordion (solo or in ensemble) as well as works for piano, organ, flute, solo voice, and choir.
Restrictions on use

There are no restrictions on the use of the Collection. Requests for reproductions of material protected by U.S. Copyright Law and its revisions will be granted only upon presentation of the written permission of all associated copyright holder(s).

Associations

The John J. Serry, Sr., Collection bears particular relevance to the history of the American dance band and the development of popular music in the mid-20th century. In this light, the Sam Forman Dance Orchestra Collection and the Carl Dengler Collection may also be of interest. The Sam Forman Dance Orchestra Collection comprises the performing library used by Jeno Bartal and his orchestra (a New York City dance band active in the mid-20th century, roughly contemporary with John Serry, Sr.), including full and partial sets of performance parts for nearly 200 popular compositions published between 1910 and 1960. (N.B. The Collection’s namesake, Sam Forman, served as the music librarian for the Bartal Orchestra; Forman also performed as a drummer with the Bartal Orchestra, the Lester Lanin Orchestra, and other NYC dance bands and orchestras in the 1920s–1970s.) Additionally, the collection of Carl Dengler, a prominent Rochester dance band leader (active 1927-1990), contains performing parts and lead sheets for dance band arrangements conducted by Dengler, including several hundred manuscript parts, published arrangements, and more than 700 items of published popular sheet music, most of which date from the 1920s–1960s.
DESCRIPTION OF SERIES

Series 1: Compositions

Mr. Serry’s compositions have been arranged into seven sub-series according to instrumentation, as outlined below. Within each sub-series, the works are arranged in chronological order by date (or approximate date) of composition, and then alphabetically by title. Several of the scores were received in office folders that contained information about the date of composition, recordings, and revisions; accordingly, these folders (and any accompanying notes) have been preserved in the Collection.

Sub-series A: Large ensemble
Sub-series B: Solo instrument
Sub-series C: Accordion
Sub-series D: Solo keyboard
Sub-series E: Vocal
Sub-series F: Ensemble arrangements
Sub-series G: Arrangements of Serry’s compositions

Series 2: Oversized Manuscripts

Series 2 is not a distinct series in itself but was created for convenience and ease of filing to accommodate manuscripts that require special housing consideration on grounds of their oversized dimensions. Of the 27 oversized scores in this series, three represent original compositions by Mr. Serry for large ensemble (sub-series A), and the remaining 24 are arrangements of popular tunes for accordion ensemble (sub-series B). According to the notes on the original folders that housed these manuscripts, the bulk of the arrangements were created for specific recording projects in the 1950s, including arrangements for Seeburg Juke Boxes, transcriptions for RCA Thesaurus (John Serry, Sr., as a contributing arranger and soloist with The Bel-Cordions Sextette, 1954), and selections for Serry’s album Squeeze Play (Dot Records, 1956). Within each sub-series, the works are arranged in chronological order by date of composition or recording, and then alphabetically by title.

Sub-series A: Original compositions for large ensemble
Sub-series B: Ensemble arrangements

Series 3: Scrapbook

The scrapbook that comprises Series 3 contains photographs, press clippings, correspondence, articles by Serry, publicity material, concert programs, and memorabilia documenting Serry’s career and professional activities. The materials date from approximately 1935–1964.
Series 4: Recordings

Series 4 contains ten recordings, including performances by John Serry, Sr., and performances of his compositions by other musicians. The recordings have been grouped into three sub-series according to recording format, as described below.

Sub-series A: 7” reel-to-reel tapes
Sub-series B: 10” instantaneous discs
Sub-series C: 12” instantaneous discs
INVENTORY

Series 1: Compositions

Sub-series A: Large ensemble

Box 1

Folder 1 Desert Rumba (Beguine) (s.d.). For violins, clarinets, bass clarinet, trumpets, solo piano, bass, and drums.


Folder 2 Invitation to Jive (1946). For three accordions, guitar, and bass.

Full score. Pencil MS. 11 p.

*** Garden in Monaco (1956).

Oversized; separated to Box 2/1.

*** Rockin’ the Anvil (1956).

Oversized; separated to Box 2/2.

*** Cocktails in Spain (1957).

Oversized; separated to Box 2/3.

Folder 3 Leone Jump [1950s]. For three accordions, rhythmic guitar, bass, and electric guitar.

Full score. Pencil MS. 10 p.

Accompanied by original folder labeled “Original Compositions by John Serry / & Arrangements by Serry”

Sub-series B: Solo instrument

Box 1 [cont.]


Score. Pencil MS. 2 p.

Accompanied by photocopy of p. 1 of score. MS repro. 1 p.

Folder 5 La Culebra (1951, revised 1991). For flute (or 3 flutes) and piano.

Accompanied by original folder labeled “La Culebra / Hora Staccato / La Camparsa.”

Folder 6  
Accompanied by original folder.

Sub-series C: Accordion

Box 1 [cont.]

Folder 7  
_La Cumparsa_ (s.d.). For solo accordion.
Score. Pencil/ink MS. 4 p.

Folder 8  
_Hora Guaracha_ (s.d.). For solo accordion.
Score; incomplete (pages numbered 1–2). Pencil MS. 2 p.

Folder 9  
_Hora Staccato_ (s.d.). For solo accordion.
Score; appears to be continuation of _Hora Guaracha_ (pages numbered 3–6). Pencil MS. 4 p.

Folder 10  
_Fantasy in F_ (1946). For solo accordion.
Accompanied by original folder.

Folder 11  
Accompanied by original folder.

Accompanied by original folder.


Folder 15  *Concerto in C Major* (1967). For free bass accordion.
Accompanied by original folder.

Folder 16  *Concerto in C Major* (1967). For free bass accordion.
Score excerpts, drafts, and revisions. Pencil/ink MS. [40] leaves.
Accompanied by original folder (labeled “Concerto in C spare parts, corrections, etc.”)

*Sub-series D: Solo keyboard*

**Box 1 [cont.]**

Folder 17  *Desert Rumba* (1951). For solo piano.

Folder 18  *Processional March* (1951, revised for organ 1968). For piano or organ.
Accompanied by original folder.

Draft of score (revised for solo piano), with corrections and insertions. Pencil MS and MS repro. [20] leaves.
Folder 20  
Score. Pencil MS. 5 p.

Folder 21  
Accompanied by original folder.

Folder 22  
Accompanied by photocopy of score. 2 p.
Accompanied by original folder.

Folder 23  
On verso: pencil MS sketches (labeled “5–6”). 1 p.
On verso: draft of “Hello?” and pencil MS sketches. 2 p.
Accompanied by original folder labeled “5 Children’s Pieces … Original Piano Compositions …”

Sub-series E: Vocal

Folder 24  
[1] Lead sheet (c1976); incomplete. MS repro. 1 p. 2 copies.
See also Box 1/29 (revised version, 2000).

Folder 25  
Folder 26  

   Accompanied by original folder.

Folder 27  

   Accompanied by original folder.

Folder 28  

Parts for choir (SATB), flute, and bass. Pencil MS. 1+1+1 p. Accompanied by duplicate photocopy of choir part. 1 p.
   Accompanied by original folder.

Folder 29  
*Falling Leaves* (1976, revised 2000).

   Accompanied by original folder.

See also Box 1/24 (1976 and 1989 versions).

Sub-series F: Ensemble arrangements

N.B. Additional ensemble arrangements by John Serry in Series 2, sub-series B (see Box 2).

Folder 30  
*The Rattlesnake* (s.d.). [Unidentified instrumentation.]

Folder 31  “Accordion Quartet Arrangements (1954–1955).”


Folder 32  *Beer Barrel* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, tenor sax, guitar, bass, piano, and vibes.

  Score (without piano and vibes) and parts. Pencil MS. [9] p. + 7 parts. Accompanied by original folder with note “Recorded for RCA Thesaurus 1954.”

Folder 33  *Oh You Beautiful Doll* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, tenor sax, guitar, bass, and drums.


Folder 34  *Old Macdonald Had a Farm* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, guitar, tenor sax, bass, and drums.

  Score and parts. Pencil MS. 6 p. + 5 parts. Accompanied by original folder with note “John Serry arrangement, 1954, RCA Thesaurus.”

Folder 35  *Chinatown* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, tenor sax, guitar, bass, and drums.

  Score. Pencil MS. 9 p. Accompanied by original folder with note “Recorded for RCA Thesaurus 1956.”

*Sub-series G: Arrangements of Serry’s compositions*

Folder 36  *Fantasy in F*. Arranged for orchestra and accordion by Al Traversi.

  Orchestral parts. Ink MS. 15 parts.
Series 2: Oversized Manuscripts

Sub-series A: Original compositions for large ensemble

Box 2

Folder 1 Garden in Monaco (1956). For two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records”; see Box 2/18.

Folder 2 Rockin’ the Anvil (1956). For two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records”; see Box 2/18.

Folder 3 Cocktails in Spain (1957). For marimba, percussion, guitar, bass, and organ.

Sub-series B: Ensemble arrangements

Folder 4 I Get a Kick Out of You (s.d.). Arranged for violins, three accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Accompanied by original folder (“Arrangements for Seeburg Juke Boxes”).

Folder 5 Mimi (s.d.). Arranged for violins, three accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Originally in folder labeled “Arrangements for Seeburg Juke Boxes.”

Folder 6 The One I Love (s.d.). Arranged for violins, three accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 9 p.
Originally in folder labeled “Arrangements for Seeburg Juke Boxes.”

Folder 7 Swingin’ Down the Lane (s.d.). Arranged for violins, three accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 8 p.
Originally in folder labeled “Arrangements for Seeburg Juke Boxes.”

Folder 8 Tico Tico (1950s). Arranged for three accordions, guitar, bass, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 4 p.
Accompanied by original folder.

Folder 9  *Chicago* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 7 p.
Accompanied by original folder with note “Recorded for RCA Thesaurus 1954.”

Folder 10  *I Love Louisa* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 4 p.
Accompanied by original folder with note “Recorded for RCA Thesaurus 1954.”

Folder 11  *If You Knew Susie* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 6 p.
Accompanied by original folder with note “RCA Thesaurus 1954.”

Folder 12  *Melancholy Baby* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 5 p.
Accompanied by original folder with note “Recorded for RCA Thesaurus 1954.”

Folder 13  *Nobody’s Sweetheart* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 6 p.
Accompanied by original folder with note “RCA Thesaurus 1954.”

Folder 14  *Shine On, Harvest Moon* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Score. Pencil MS. 5 p.
Accompanied by original folder with note “Recorded for RCA Thesaurus 1954.”

Folder 15  *Singin’ in the Rain* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
Accompanied by original folder with note “RCA Thesaurus 1954.”
Accompanied by original folder with note “Recorded for RCA Thesaurus 1954.”
Folder 16  *Somebody Stole My Girl* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
   Score. Pencil MS. 8 p.
   Accompanied by original folder with note “RCA Thesaurus 1954.”

Folder 17  *Tara-Ra-Boom-Dere* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
   Score. Pencil MS. 5 p.
   Accompanied by original folder with note “Recorded for RCA Thesaurus … 1954.”

Folder 18  *Blue Bell Polka* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
   Score. Pencil MS. 9 p.
   Accompanied by original folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”

Folder 19  *Button Up Your Overcoat* (s.d.). By De Sylva, Brown, and Henderson. Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
   Score. Pencil MS. 7 p.
   Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”

Folder 20  *Dream Boat*. By Cliff Friend and Dave Franklin. Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
   Score. Pencil MS. 6 p.
   Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”

Folder 21  *It’s De-Lovely*. Arranged for violins, three accordions, vibes, bass, drums, guitar, and piano. Scored by Cornel Tanassy.

Folder 22  *Kuller Kuller Tranen (Hawaien Nights)* [sic] (s.d.). By Hans Carste and Francis Vincente. Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
   Score. Pencil MS. 4 p.
   Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”

Folder 23  *My Heart Cries for You* (s.d.). By Percy Faith and Carl Sigman. Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.
   Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”
Folder 24  
*Rock 'n Roll Polka* (s.d.). By Mort Lindsen and Geo. Skinner. Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.  
Score. Pencil MS. 7 p.  
Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”

Folder 25  
*Secret Love* (s.d.). Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.  
Score. Pencil MS. 12 p.  
Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”

Folder 26  
*Side by Side* (s.d.). By Harry Woods. Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, drums, and piano.  
Score. Pencil MS. 4 p.  
Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”

Folder 27  
*Terry’s Theme* (s.d.). By Charles Chaplin. Arranged for two accordions, vibes, guitar, bass, and piano.  
Score. Pencil MS. 3 p.  
Originally in folder labeled “Squeeze Play / Album Selections / 1956 Dot Records.”

Series 3:  
**Scrapbook**

**Box 3**

**Item 1**  
Album, with note “John Serry Sr., scrap book, memorable moments, clippings.”  
12” x 12”.  
15 leaves containing photographs, press clippings, correspondence, articles by Serry, publicity material, concert programs, and memorabilia documenting John Serry’s career and professional activities (ca. 1935–1964).  
Also includes 1 letter from Daniel Zager to Peter Serry (November 2003) and printout of tracklist and artist credits for the CD release of *That Old Feeling* (ASV Living Era, 2004).

Series 4:  
**Recordings**

Sub-series A: 7” reel-to-reel tapes

**Item 2**  
*Concerto in C major*, in two movements, for bassetti accordion by John Serry, Sr.  
7” audio reel.  
Recorded by Joe Nappi [student of Serry] on a Guiletti accordion.
Item 3  
[Rhapsody in Blue (by G. Gershwin) and other compositions arranged by John Serry.] 7” audio reel.  
Contents: Rhapsody in Blue / Gershwin; arr. Serry (John Serry) -- Allegro / Haydn; arr. Serry (Serry Quartette) -- “2 pop arrangements played by John Serry?” -- “Van Damme Quartette.”

Item 4  
American Rhapsody, for solo accordion by John Serry, Sr. 7” audio reel.  
Recorded by John Serry, Sr.

Sub-series B: 10” instantaneous discs

Item 5  
John Serry (with Robert Serry) on Live Like a Millionaire. WNBC broadcast, October 22, 1951. 10” disc.

Item 6  
“Desert Rhumba”; “The Rattlesnake (La Culebra)” by John Serry, Sr. 10” disc.  
Recorded by Julie Baker, flute soloist.

Item 7  
Shep Fields and his orchestra with Toni Arden. Commercial LP. Royale 18142, 1955. 10” disc, 33 1/3 RPM.  
Side A] Thou swell -- Where or when -- There’s a small hotel -- My heart stood still --  
[Side B] Two loves -- Let’s be sweethearts again -- We just couldn’t say goodbye -- Baby don’t be mad at me.

Sub-series C: 12” instantaneous discs

Item 8  
John Serry, featured as “outstanding accordionist of the year,” guest appearance on Skyline Roof with Gordon Macrae. WABC-CBS broadcast, August 22, 1946. Two sides (parts 1 and 3). 12” disc.  
Label on sleeve lists four tracks:  
[Side 1] Doing what comes naturally -- Cynthia is in love (Owens) --  
[Side 2] John Serry solo -- More than you know (Herman).

Item 9  
[Side 1] Dizzy fingers.

Item 10  
John Serry Sextette. 12” disc.  
John Serry as conductor, arranger, and solo accordionist.  
Transcriptions recorded for RCA Thesaurus; recorded at RCA Victor Studios, October 21, 1954.  
[Side 1] Harvest moon -- Melancholy baby -- Singin’ in the rain -- Nobody’s sweetheart -- Button-up your overcoat -- Chicago -- If you knew Susie --
[Side 2] Somebody stole by mal -- Ta-ra-boom de-re -- Old McDonald -- Beer barrel -- I love Louisa -- Oh you beautiful doll -- Chinatown -- Happy birthday to you -- For he’s a jolly good fellow -- Original jacket liner and accompanying document separated to Box 3/11.

Folder 11 Material separated from Box 3/10.
[1] Original jacket liner for Box 3/10, with list of performers on record.

Item 12 Squeeze Play. Commercial LP. Dot Records, DLP-3024, [1956]. 12” disc, 33 1/3 RPM.
Featuring the dynamic accordion of John Serry, [lead accordion]; with Al Caiola, guitar; Bernie Leighton, piano; Frank Carroll, bass; Charlie Roeder, drums; Alf Nystrom, electric accordion; Harry Breur, vibes and marimba.
[Side 1] Garden in Monaco / Serry -- Terry’s theme / Chaplin -- When my dreamboat comes home / Friend and Franklin -- Blue Bell / Stanley -- Rockin’ the anvil / Serry -- Secret love / Webster and Fain --